



**THE HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT IN “THE NEGRO MOTHER”  
A POEM BY LANGSTON HUGHES**

**A THESIS**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Bachelor Degree Majoring Literature in English Department  
Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University**

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## **PRONOUNCEMENT**

The writer honestly confirms that he compiles this thesis entitled “The Hidden Transcript in “The Negro Mother” a poem by Langston Hughes” by himself and without taking any result from other researchers in S-1, S-2, S-3, and in diploma degree of any university. The writer ascertains also that he does not quote any material from other publications or someone’s paper except from the references mentioned.

Semarang, 8 September 2017

Ayub Ryan Primaditra

## MOTTO AND DEDICATION

“I think, therefore I am”

----- **Renè Descartes**

“Those who can conquer themselves, conquer the world.”

----- **Ayub Ryan Primaditra**

“Kalian boleh maju dalam pelajaran, mungkin mencapai deretan gelar kesarjanaan apa saja, tapi tanpa mencintai sastra, kalian tinggal hanya hewan yang pandai”

----- **Pramoedya Ananta Toer**

“*Ars longa, vita brevis*. Seni itu panjang, hidup itu pendek. Siapa tak bahagia bila hidupnya yang pendek diperpanjang abadi dalam nama yang dicantumkan di dalam puisi?”

----- **Sujiwo Tejo, *Rahvayana 2***

*This thesis is dedicated to my family and everyone who  
supported me to accomplish this thesis.*

**APPROVAL**

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Semarang, 8 September 2017

Ayub Ryan Primaditra

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## **ABSTRACT**

Langston Hughes's "The Negro Mother" is a poem which tells about the suffering a black mother from working as a slave. The objectives of this thesis are to show the condition of the Negro mother, to show the relation between denotation and connotation used in the poem, and to tell the hidden transcript contained in the poem. The writer uses library research in collecting the data. To analyze the extrinsic elements of the poem, the writer uses Tong's concept of class consciousness and alienation and Scott's concept of public and hidden transcript. The result of this thesis is that the Negro mother is oppressed and exploited by her employers. Being oppressed as a slave, the Negro mother dreams and hopes for freedom. The dreams and hopes are hidden within the poem.

Keyword: oppression, alienation, hidden transcript, freedom, exploitation

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The poem “The Negro Mother” was written by Langston Hughes. Most of his works describe the life and condition of black people (McLaren, 2003), which this poem is also included. According to the writer, this poem portrays the miserable life of a black mother who works as a slave. She is oppressed by both patriarchy and capitalist system.

“The Negro Mother” is not a long poem and it consists of only three stanzas. Each stanza has a different number of lines which construct it. The first stanza tells about the condition of the Negro mother as in “I am the woman who labored as slave, beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave”. The stanza explains the terrible condition of the Negro mother. She works as a slave, the worst job that no one wants to, but she is still treated even worse.

The second stanza is the shortest stanza in the poem. It describes the hope of the Negro mother. Although she suffers a terrible life, she still has hope for a better life as in line “But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth. God put a dream like steel in my soul”.

The last stanza is the longest one and sums up the hope of the Negro mother and how to reach it. All that she wants is to give her children a free life, a life that

everyone else dreams about. In line ‘I had only hope then, but now through you, Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true’, she cannot get a free life because she cannot free herself from slavery. Her hope and her dream of free life can be realized only through her children in the future. The last line of the poem ‘For I will be with you till no white brother dares keep down the children of the Negro Mother’ tells that she not only wants her children to be free from slavery but also to be recognized and treated as a human being.

Slavery is the painful history for black people (Worth, 2005:12). They were taken forcefully from their land and had to go travel across oceans just to work for men they barely even knew. They worked hard, but they only got a little wage or even got none. They were treated badly not only because of the difference of social status but also because of their skin color.

The writer is interested in analyzing the hidden transcript in the poem. In other words, the meaning that the Negro mother hides from the public. The meaning is hidden through connotative words which are used in the poem. For those reasons, the writer chose “The Hidden Transcript in “The Negro Mother” a Poem by Langston Hughes” as the title of the thesis.

## **1.2 Research Problems**

In this thesis, the writer discusses the problems as follows:

1.2.1 How is denotation described?

1.2.2 How is connotation described?

1.2.3 How is denotation related to connotation?

1.2.4 How is the relation used to describe the hidden transcript in the poem?

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

After reading Langston Hughes' "The Negro Mother", the writer determines to analyze this poem because of the hidden transcript contained in the poem. The purposes of the study are presented as follows:

1.3.1 To describe denotation in the poem.

1.3.2 To describe connotation in the poem.

1.3.3 To explain the relation between denotation and connotation.

1.3.4 To explain the hidden transcript contained in the poem.

### **1.4 Methods of the Study**

There are two methods of the study which are used in this thesis: research method and approach method. For the research method, the writer uses library research to support the analysis of structures of the poem. As it is stated by George that library research "involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/ expert opinion on a research question; necessary component of every other research method at some point." (2008:6). Books and articles from internet sources are used by the writer in gathering the data.

The approach method uses two theories: Tong's concept of Class Consciousness and Alienation and Scott's concept of Public and Hidden Transcript. Tong's concept of Class Consciousness and Alienation is used to analyze the

symbol in the poem that hide the real meaning of the Negro mother, while Scott's concept of Public and Hidden Transcript will be used to show the hidden meaning in the poem.

### **1.5 Organization of the Thesis**

The organization of this thesis comprises five chapters.

#### **CHAPTER I                      INTRODUCTION**

This chapter consists of five sub-chapters. They are background of the study, research problems, objectives of the study, methods of the study, and organizations of the study.

#### **CHAPTER II                      LITERATURE REVIEW**

The short biography of Langston Hughes which focuses on the poem are found in this chapter.

#### **CHAPTER III                      THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.**

In this chapter, the writer mentions the theories which are used in chapter four.

**CHAPTER IV****DISCUSSION**

It is the main chapter of the thesis. Both intrinsic and extrinsic elements are discussed in this chapter.

**CHAPTER V****CONCLUSION**

This chapter is the result and summary of the previous chapters.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Short Biography of Langston Hughes**

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, United States. Langston and his mother started to move from city to city for living when his father immigrated to Mexico. Hughes started to write and publish his poems and short stories in his school's monthly magazine (McLaren, 2003:xi).

One year after Wall Street crashed in 1929, Hughes personal crash came. He lost his patron. Job was hard to find along with scholarship and literary prizes. For years, Hughes had been a writer who wrote to put his emotions into exterior form. He always wrote to express his emotion through writing, but then he decided to make a living from writing. Hughes had few problems in his journey. The first was the U.S magazine used very few stories with Negro themes because it was considered exotic compared with the Chinese or East Indian features. Publisher or magazines never hired Negro writers or employed them. Then, he had to puzzle out how a Negro could make living from writing in America. The other problem was his dilemma. Hughes did not want to write fake "true" stories to be sold as commercials as any other writers did. He wanted to write what he knew best. He wanted to write about the Negro people and made that writing earn him for a living (2003:40).

When he was in New York, Langston lived in West 135<sup>th</sup> Street Y in Harlem. Langston still thought how he wanted to sell out his work. He remembered the word Mrs. Bethune, a colleague of him, said to him that his people need poetry. Thus, Langston decided to go to the South on tour. He read his poems in front of Negro students and people from city to city and college to college. He went to Downingtown, Morgan College, Howard University, Virginia State College, Hampton Institute, and many more. He went deeper into Dixie using poetry as his passport. He had traveled to every state in South by winter. Langston prepared a smaller booklet of his new poem because he thought that it was a depression times and sometimes a dollar was a lot of money for some people. The title was “The Negro Mother”, a story of colored mother who worked as a slave. He asked Prentiss Taylor, a white young artist from Greenwich Village to design the booklet. He wanted his booklet to be an evidence that interracial collaboration and friendship might be possible (2003:72).

Throughout his life, Langston Hughes had spread his message all over the countries. He succeeded in telling the stories of his people through his works. His work reflected actual culture, suffering, laughter, and language of his people. Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967, in New York City. His residence has been given landmark status and has been renamed “Langston Hughes Place” (Joplin, n.d.: par. 5)



## **CHAPTER III**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **3.1 Intrinsic Elements**

Intrinsic elements are essential to be understood in understanding the poem. There will be confusion in understanding what the poem says if the readers do not understand the figurative languages which are used in the poem. There are several intrinsic elements in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Mother" and the writer analyzes several intrinsic elements shown in the poem. The intrinsic elements comprise diction, which consists of denotation and connotation, and symbol.

##### **3.1.1 Diction**

Diction is simply the choice of words often used in making literary works or scientific writing. Like all writers, poets are aware of their diction. They choose words precisely and carefully because the words are highly valued in the poems. Thus, choosing words in writing a poem has its problem; it is as Meyer states:

Also, poems are usually briefer than other forms of writing. A few inappropriate words in a 200-page novel (which would have about 100,000 words) create fewer problems than they would in a 100 word poem. Functioning in a compressed atmosphere, the words in a poem must convey meanings gracefully and economically (2011:375).

Diction in the poem means the choice of words which Hughes used to imply the meaning of the poem. For example, the word 'home' denotes a building that a

person or group of people live permanently, but the word may connote safety, privacy, intimacy, and happiness.

#### **3.1.1.1 Denotation**

Denotation, according to Meyer, is “the literal, dictionary meanings of a word” (2011:377). For example, ‘home’ denotes a building that a person or group of people live permanently. In the poem, the word ‘dark’ in line seven means having a dark skin denotatively.

#### **3.1.1.2 Connotation**

In addition to denotative meaning, a word may carry connotation or connotative meaning. Connotation is “associations and implications that go beyond a word’s literal meaning” (2011:377). Connotations come from how people associate the word that has been used with other meaning. Taking the same example, the word ‘home’, when it comes to denotation, is a building which a person or people live, but ‘home’, when it comes to connotation, refers to a feeling or situation associated with it. ‘Home’ connotes privacy, safety, comfort zone, and happiness. In the poem, the word ‘dark’ in line seven may connotatively mean sorrow, painful, and cold.

### **3.2 Extrinsic Elements**

Extrinsic elements in a poem may concern the situation within the poem itself or the theories that can be used to analyze the meaning of the poem. The

situation can be the society where the poets write their poems. In “The Negro Mother”, the writer explains three extrinsic elements of the poem, namely previous studies, Rosemarie Tong’s concept of Class Consciousness and Alienation, James C. Scott’s concept of Hidden Transcript, and a brief history of U.S Slavery.

### **3.2.1 Previous Studies**

Nuria (2012) of Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, conducts a research entitled “Discrimination against the Blacks and Chicanos in Hughes’ “Children’s Rhyme” and Mora’s “Legal Alien””. In her study, she compares the discrimination which black people suffered in Hughes’ poem with the discrimination which Chicano suffered in Mora’s poem. The conclusion of her study is that the black people only got discriminated by majority class, which was the white people, while on the other hand, Chicanos got discriminated by both majority class and their own people.

Using the same spirit which Hughes used in his works which has been analyzed by Nuria, the writer conducts the same research using Hughes’ poem “The Negro Mother”. Langston Hughes’ works mainly concern the suffering of the black people. The previous research deals with the discrimination of the blacks but this research deals with the hidden transcript of a Negro mother.

What Nuria does not discuss in her research is that she does not mention Hughes personal crash and his historical background which affect Hughes’ works.

As already been mentioned before, Hughes' works reflected actual culture, suffering, laughter, and language of black people. This happens because his personal crash came one year after Wall Street crash or known as The Great Depressions occurred. When he lost his patron and job was hard to find during the Great Depressions, he decided to make a living from writing but the writing itself must be stories that told the reader about his people; their suffering, their culture, and their language. Hughes did not want to write stories which only to fulfill of to satisfy the readers. One of the stories, written in poetic form, is "The Negro Mother".

### **3.2.2 Rosemarie Tong's Concept of Class Consciousness and Alienation**

According to Tyson, "differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender" (2006:54). To put it simply, socioeconomic class divides the 'have' and the 'have-not' people. From Marxist perspective, the 'have' is called bourgeoisie and the 'have-not' is called proletariat. The bourgeoisie control human and world's resources, while the proletariat perform the manual labor. The proletariat, who are under control of bourgeoisie, will one day develop class consciousness to rise up against the bourgeoisie and create a classless society.

Class consciousness is the opposite of false consciousness (Tong, 2014:97). To put it simply, false consciousness is the way the bourgeoisie trick the proletariat

from recognizing their true needs as human being. For example, paid maternity leave or health-care benefits are meant to give the proletariat a state of mind that those benefits are bonus from their hard work. The bourgeoisie want the proletariat to think that they are care for them by giving those benefits. The more benefits are given to the workers, the less likely the workers develop class consciousness. To conclude, class consciousness is when the proletariat or the workers start to recognizing that they have been exploited and tricked by the bourgeoisie.

One of the signs that the proletariat starts to develop class consciousness is alienation. Wood suggested that people are alienated “if either they experience themselves or lives meaningless, or they are able of keeping a meaningful life only with help of illusions about themselves or their condition” (1981:8). Marx divides alienation into four kinds, but these kinds should be connected in some significant way rather than viewed as separate. First, workers are alienated from product of their work. These workers have no right to say in what commodities they will or will not produce. In addition, the fruits of their work are snatched from them. They cannot enjoy the fruits of their work and cannot do nothing about them.

Second, workers are alienated from themselves. They are forced to work more than their employers pay them. As a result, they undergo work as something unpleasant and want to finish the work as quickly as possible. In other words, they work because they have to instead of they want to. It may cause a psychological

crisis. They may start to feel like hamster that keeps running on a wheel, going nowhere.

Third, workers are alienated from other human beings. In capitalist structure, the workers are forced and encouraged to see other worker as competitor for promotions. It may cause the lack of solidarity between workers. They are unable to recognize other worker as friends or cooperators that will make them to lose their chance to be happy while working.

Fourth, workers are alienated from nature they live in. It is because they are in position in which they see nature as an obstacle to their survival. This negative perception of nature leads them to an opposition where connectedness among all elements of nature (Tong, 2014:97).

Among the four kinds of alienation, the poem contains three kinds of alienation. In the poem, when the Negro mother brings the cotton and corn to be sold represents the first kind of alienation. When the Negro mother says she could not read and write represents the second kind of alienation. The last kind of alienation is represented when the Negro mother is separated from her husband and her children.

### **3.2.3 Hidden Transcript**

Public transcript and Hidden transcript are theories developed by James C. Scott. The theories deal with power relation between dominant and subordinate. Public transcript is the utterance or expression that we show in front of people but

hidden transcript is the expression or feeling that one shows when he is beyond dominant observation (Scott, 1991:3). The more powerless people are, the greater hidden transcript they have. It contains frustration, tiredness, or anger that cannot be expressed publicly because of fear of reprisal.

Scott gives both example of Public and Hidden Transcript in his book. For Public Transcript, Scott gives an example from oral history of a French tenant farmer, Old Tiennon. Scott states that

When he [the landlord who had dismissed his father] crossed from Le Craux, going to Meillers, he would stop and speak to me and I forced myself to appear amiable, in spite of the contempt I felt for him” (1991:2).

It can be inferred that the art of dissimulation is necessary in life. The quotation implicitly states that Old Tiennon could not speak his disrespect to the landlord because he was afraid that the landlord would not let him to use his land anymore.

Thus, Scott gives the example of Hidden Transcript taken from slavery in antebellum U.S South. Marry Livermore, a white governess from New England, recounted Aggy’s reaction, a normally taciturn black cook, to the beating Aggy’s master had given to her daughter. Her daughter was accused of some minor theft and was beaten while Aggy was watching, powerless. The reaction of Aggy when her master left the kitchen can be seen from the way she talked to Marry below

Thar's a day a-comin'! Thar's a day a-comin'! . . . I hear the rumblin ob de chariots! I see de flashin ob de guns! White folks blood is a runnin on the ground like a ribber, an de dead's heaped up dat high! . . . Oh Lor! Hasten de day when de blows, an de bruises, and de aches an de pains, shall come to de white folks, an de buzzards shall eat dem as dey's dead in de streets. Oh Lor! roll on de chariots, an gib the black people rest and peace. Oh Lor!

Gib me de pleasure ob livin' till dat day, when I shall see white folks shot down like de wolves when dey come hungry out o'de woods (1991:5)

One can imagine what might have happened to Aggy if that speech were delivered to her master. Apparently, Aggy considered Marry as a close friend so that she felt safe to let out her rage and anger. We can see a contradiction between Aggy's Hidden Transcript which shows that she is emotional person and Aggy's Public Transcript which shows that she is an obedient servant.

### **3.2.4 A Brief History of U.S Slavery**

America was first found by Christopher Columbus accidentally when he was in search of a westward route to Asia. The news then spread over Europe that he had found a New World. As a result, many Europeans came to America for many reasons that commonly known as 3Gs (Gold, Gospel, and Glory). In the beginning of 1500s, a group of European immigrants came to America. They were volunteer sailors and soldiers. They were promised rewards for their labor (Worth, 2005:6).

When the settlements were established, small number of immigrants from Europe such as Spain, Portugal, France, and England arrived. Most of these people were poor. They had to pay expensive ocean Voyage from Europe to Western Hemisphere by promising work for years. They were pushed out from Europe because religious persecution, high land prices, and poverty (2005:7).

For those reasons, it can be inferred that the emigrants came to America because it promised fertile land, cheap land prices, and more religious freedom than



they had in their homeland since America was a New World which means a new hope.

However, Africans came to America did not come by their own choice.

Worth explains that

In addition, African men, women, and children were kidnapped in Africa and forced onto slave ships. They were transported to America and forced to work for European masters. While voluntary emigrants had some choice of which territory they would move to, involuntary immigrants had no choice at all (2005:7).

During the seventeenth century, workers who were needed in the North of the U.S were increasing. As a result, the number of Africans slave being brought to the North of the U.S was also increasing. The slaves who were captured were brought to trade posts located along African coast. Later, they were packed and brought to English colonies in the Caribbean and North America. For Africans, the journey to America was terrible experience. Seeing that their future was sealed as a slave, many of them jumped into the sea and drowned themselves. The others starved themselves and often died before reaching America because they were depressed (Worth, 2005:20).

The number of slaves in the South of the U.S was larger than in the North of the U.S because the North had grown to an industrialized country, which meant they were using fewer workers, while the South still relied on crops and plantation. Some of South African slaves fled themselves to the North to find freedom; it is just as Worth states

Many slaves did not wait to be set free but ran away to find for themselves the freedom that was proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. Some African Americans in the North found freedom among the British, who captured New York in 1776 and Philadelphia the following year. The British offered slaves their freedom as a way of turning them against the American war effort. Hundreds of slaves fled to New York and Philadelphia, where they were employed by the British building fortifications, serving on ships, and working as servants to British soldiers. In the South, slaves also escaped from the plantations and joined the British army (2005:29).

The writer sees that what had happened to the Negro mother is not different from Worth's statement historically. Hence, the history of U.S slavery is used as a background for analyzing the poem.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

One of the signs which indicates the proletariat start to develop class consciousness is the alienation. The workers are alienated because they do not enjoy what they do. They are forced to work against their own will and they are paid a little or even get none. Hence, the workers want to rise up against their employers. However, it is not an easy thing to do. The workers are powerless against the employers. They have to risk their job, or even their life. They may lose their job or treated badly. If they cannot act against their oppressors, the hidden transcript is made. The hidden transcript is the emotion or expression which cannot be spoken to their oppressors. In the poem, the hidden transcript is hidden through denotation, connotation, and symbol.

The analysis of the poem will be divided into two sub-chapters; the first sub-chapter is the analysis of class consciousness and alienation, and the second sub-chapter is the analysis of the hidden transcript of the Negro mother through denotation, connotation.

#### **4.1 Class Consciousness and Alienation**

The poem tells about a black mother who is forced to work as a slave. From a Marxist perspective, the Negro mother is a proletariat because she is exploited and works under her employer. The Negro mother succeed in developing class

consciousness. She realizes that she and her race have been treated badly and have been exploited to satisfy and to fulfill their employer's needs. It can be seen from the first stanza of the poem, line one to four.

Children, I come back today  
To tell you a story of the long dark way  
That I had to climb, that I had to know  
In order that the race might live and grow. (Stanza 1, line 1-4)

In the beginning of the poem, the Negro mother says that the story of her life and her race will be told to her children so that the race might live and grow. It is obvious that she has developed class consciousness because she realizes that many of her people have died during slavery. She tells the story to her children in the hope that the next generation will live and the race will not die of slavery.

The impact of her development of class consciousness is alienation. Because she realizes that she has been tricked and fooled by her employer, she does not enjoy what she does. Hence, she is alienated. The first alienation is that she is alienated from the fruit of her work. The Negro mother is forced to work to produce the commodity the employers want, but she cannot enjoy the product from her hard work. It can be seen in the first stanza, line nine to ten below

I am the woman who worked in the field  
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield. (Stanza 1, line 9-10)

As a slave, she has a job to plant and harvest the cotton and the corn, yet she cannot do anything about the product of her work. After being harvested, the cotton and the corn have to be brought to her employer. The problem is that she cannot decide

what commodity she will or will not produce. She cannot decide whether the commodity she produces will be sold or consumed either. She has no right to decide anything related to the product. All the rights related to the commodity belong to her employer. In line eleven to twelve, the emphasizing of the first alienation can be found.

I am the one who labored as a slave,  
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave – (Stanza 1, line 11-12).

Being a slave means they have a heavier job than any other kind of occupation. Yet, the lines state that the Negro mother gets beaten and mistreated for the work she gives. She works hard to produce the commodities which are chosen by her employers, gives the commodities to them, but still gets beaten and mistreated. It is ironic. The Negro mother does everything her employer asks for, but her hard work is still not appreciated. She bears the burden of both alienation and violence as the mistreatment she receives.

The second kind of alienation can be seen in the third stanza line twenty-one to twenty-two.

I couldn't read then. I couldn't write.  
I had nothing, back there in the night. (Stanza 3, line 21-22)

To read and to write are one of the basic human needs, but the lines state that the Negro mother cannot read or write. Line twenty two emphasizes the previous line by saying that she has nothing. From those lines, it can be inferred that being a slave or proletariat means that they have to lose their rights of their basic needs. They do

not have time even for learning how to read or how to write. They have to work hard, get beaten and mistreated, or also lost their rights. They have to sacrifice their time to fulfill their basic needs and turns it into a product which can be sold and can make a profit for their employer. It can be assumed that they have been massively exploited by their employer.

The last kind of alienation suffered by the Negro mother can be seen in the first stanza line thirteen to fourteen.

Children sold away from me, I'm husband sold, too.  
No safety, no love, no respect was I due. (Stanza 1, line 13-14)

The line refers to alienation from other human beings. As a mother, she is separated from her children whom half of her life is put into. As a wife, she is separated from her husband whom she wants to spend her life with. Being a slave also means that the Negro mother loses her chance to be happy and enjoy her life with her family. Line fourteen emphasizes that she is alienated from other human beings by saying that she gets no safety, no love, and no respect from other people.

From those kinds of alienation which the Negro mother suffers, it can be concluded that she has to undergo a meaningless life because of working under the oppression of slavery. She is forced to work against her own will, yet the fruit of her work is still snatched away from her. She cannot have the chance to be happy with her family because they are forcefully separated. Thus, as a human being, she gets no respect from other human beings. However, experiencing such a life does not make her give up her life. She tells her story and her sorrow to her children in

the hope they will have a better life. The hidden transcript of the Negro mother are found in the next sub-chapter.

## 4.2 Hidden Transcript

The hidden transcript is hidden through denotation, connotation used in the poem. As has been mentioned before, the hidden transcript contains frustration, tiredness, and expression that cannot be expressed publicly. In the poem, the Negro mother writes her frustration, her tiredness, and her expression to her children instead of expressing it toward her employer. Therefore, the hidden transcript will be divided into three parts; the first part is the frustration of the Negro mother, the second part is the tiredness of the Negro mother, and the third part is the expression of the Negro mother.

### 4.2.1 The Frustration of the Negro Mother

Children, I **come back** today  
To tell you a story of the long **dark** way

In the first stanza, there are several words that can be a key to reveal the hidden transcript of the Negro mother. The phrasal verb ‘come back’ in the first line means denotatively to return to a place or people where one belongs to. From the definition, the phrasal verb implies two things; either she dies and ‘come back’ to life to tell her story to her children, or she runs away from her employer and ‘come back’ to tell them her story.

That I had to **climb**, that I had to know  
 In order that the race might **live** and **grow**.  
 Look at my face - **dark** as the **night** –  
 Yet shining like the sun with love's true light.  
 I am the **dark girl** who crossed the **red sea**  
 Carrying in my body the **seed** of the free. (stanza 1, line 3-8)

The word 'dark' can be found in several lines in the first stanza. 'Dark' denotes black in color or having dark skin as in line seven. 'Dark girl' means a girl who has black skin. It also can be found in line five. The word 'night' emphasizes the word 'dark' as in "Look at my face – dark as the night –". In addition, the word 'dark' also has connotative meaning. It may connote fear, bad, unhappiness, or gloomy. In line two, "To tell you a story of the long dark way" means that the Negro mother tells a 'dark' story. This is a story that relates to her life; fear, unhappiness, and gloom.

In line three, the word 'climb' denotes move to a higher position and move with effort. It can be assumed that the Negro mother has to struggle in life before telling her story to her children. She has to undergo slavery and she has to deal with oppression. In line four, "In order that the race might live and grow", she refers to the existence of her race. The word 'grow' means become greater or larger denotatively. From line one to four, it can be concluded that the Negro mother tells a story of her life as a subordinate race which undergoes slavery. She tells the story to her children in order to her race can have a better life and does not die under the oppression of slavery.

I am the **dark girl** who crossed the **red sea**  
 Carrying in my body the **seed** of the free. (Stanza 1, line 7-8)



In line seven, the phrase 'red sea' implies a connotative meaning. The word 'red' connotes the color of blood while the word 'sea' denotes a vast expanse of water. So, the phrase 'red sea' may connotatively mean a sea of blood. It is relevant to what had happened to native African during the slavery era. The native African, men, women, and children, were kidnapped and forcefully taken into a slave ship. They were brought to America to work as a slave. The journey to America was a brutal experience for them because they were taken forcefully and did not have a choice at all. During the journey, they were depressed and many of them jumped and drowned into the sea. The others starved themselves to death or got sick before reaching America. They were chained together below decks so that many of them could not reach the tubs used as toilets. As a result, the human wastes became a breeding ground for fatal disease. The phrase 'red sea' implies a meaning that many of the slaves which were brought to America died during the journey (Worth, 2005:20). Their death or their blood can cover the sea. In addition, the word 'girl' implies that the Negro mother is taken when she is a kid because the word 'girl' denotes a female child. Moreover, in the next lines, the Negro mother refers herself using the word 'woman'.

In line eight, the word 'seed' connotatively symbolizes a new life that soon to be born. In other words, the word 'seed' is the Negro mother's offspring or descendant. From line seven to eight, it can be concluded that the Negro mother is pregnant when she is taken into America. It is a tough life and experience for an expectant mother to travel such a journey. Knowing that her life will be tough and

hard, she hopes that her children will be freed from slavery by saying in line eight “Carrying in my body the seed of the free”.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the Negro mother is frustrated because she is taken forcefully from her land when she is pregnant. It is a brutal experience for a pregnant woman to travel such a journey and to watch her people die during the journey.

#### **4.2.2 The Tiredness of the Negro Mother**

Three hundred years in the deepest **South**:  
But God put a **song** and a **prayer** in my mouth. (Stanza 2, line 15-16)

The word ‘South’ in the first line of the second stanza refers to the South of the U.S. In the South, a large number of slaves were mostly found because the South relied on crops and plantations. It means that the South employs slaves to help them to produce commodity instead of using a machine just like the North does. The word ‘deepest’ refers to far down below surface denotatively. It can be concluded that the first line of the second stanza tells that the Negro mother escapes herself from plantations and hides in the deepest of the South of the U.S. It is relevant to what has been stated in the previous chapter; that the slaves did not wait to be set free but run away and escaped and found themselves the freedom. In the poem, the Negro mother also escapes and tries to find freedom, but instead of joining the British army, she chooses to hide because she is pregnant. She cannot risk both of her life and her children’s life. The next line describes what she does when she hides.

The writer takes the word 'song' as a short poem or another set of words which is meant to be sung and the word also connotes with happiness and joy. On the other hand, the word 'pray' connotes wish and hope for a particular outcome. From those explanation, it can be concluded that line sixteen tells that the Negro mother still has hope when she escapes and hides from slavery. She still believes in God and she believes that God will help her to overcome the situation.

God put a dream like **steel** in my soul.  
Now, through my children, I'm reaching the **goal**. (stanza 2, line 17-18)

In line seventeen, the word 'steel' is used to emphasize the word 'dream'. The word 'steel' denotes a hard and strong thing. Thus, the line implies that the Negro mother's dream is strong and unbreakable, and she will struggle to reach the dream. To be free is a prestigious dream which every slave can dream of. At least, if they cannot get their freedom, they want their offspring or their descendants to be free from slavery, to live a better life, and to be treated equally as a human being. The same thing happens with the Negro mother. She realizes that she cannot get her freedom. Thus, she hopes her children can realize her dream. It can be seen in line eighteen. The word 'goal' refers to the dream that the Negro mother wants to be realized. The line implies that the 'goal' can only be reached or be fulfilled only through the children of the Negro mother. It may be caused by the death of the Negro mother so that she cannot reach the dream by herself. It is also relevant to the phrase 'come back' in the first stanza of the poem. She 'come back' from the death to tell the story of the race and to pass the dream to her children.

I couldn't read then. I couldn't write.  
I had **nothing**, back there in the **night**. (Stanza 3, line 21-22)

The lines have been discussed in the previous sub-chapter. The lines prove that the Negro mother is alienated from herself because she cannot get the rights of her basic needs; to read and to write. All of her time is used for working. She does not have the time to learn how to read and how to write. In addition to alienation, the line twenty-two strongly emphasizes that the Negro mother literally has nothing to live with. The word 'night' in line twenty-two connotes dark, lonely, cold, and void. The word refers to the terrible life of the Negro mother has to experience. She is alienated from the fruit of her work; she gets beaten and mistreated for her work, she is separated from both her husband and her children, and she cannot get her rights to learn how to read and write. It can be concluded that the line twenty-two tells that the Negro mother literally has nothing when she is under slavery. She is pregnant, separated from her family, and has to work hard to produce the commodity which her employer wants. She is alone and has no one and nothing to accompany her in living her life.

Sometimes, the **valley** was filled with tears,  
But I kept **trudging** on through the **lonely years**. (Stanza 3, line 23-24)

The word 'valley' means a low area of land denotatively. From the denotation, the connotative meaning of 'valley' can be found by relating to what happened to the Negro mother. The word 'valley' connotes the lowest point of the Negro mother's life. This lowest point is when she is left alone and she has to work hard for her employer. The line twenty-three implies that although the Negro

mother looks strong and tough, she also has a weak point. In addition, the line also means that she is sad because she has a terrible life as a slave. She is sad because she has no one to support her back when she is at her lowest point of her life, which is when she is alienated and gets beaten and mistreated. The line also proves that the Negro mother is a human being who also can feel sadness.

Although she feels sad about having been left alone, the next line states that the Negro mother does not drown in her sadness and do nothing about it. The word ‘trudging’ in line twenty-four means to walk slowly with heavy steps denotatively. This slow walk may be caused as if the Negro mother bears a heavy burden on her back. The phrase ‘lonely years’ explicitly states that the Negro mother has to live alone to work as a slave. The phrase ‘lonely years’ emphasizes the previous line in the first stanza that she is separated from both her husband and her children. From the explanation, it can be concluded that although the Negro mother feels sad about being alone, she still walks down the path, even it is slow, to pass those heavy years of being a slave. Her hope and her dream, as previously stated, is her motivation to be able to keep living in such a terrible life.

Sometimes, the **road** was hot with the **sun**,  
 But I had to keep on till my **work** was done:  
 I had to keep on! No stopping for me – (Stanza 3, 25-27)

The word ‘road’ connotatively symbolizes a path or a life which the Negro mother has to take. Denotatively, the word ‘road’ means a path which leads from one place to another. In walking down the path, or to put it simply, living a life, it is obvious that one may meet an obstacle. In those lines, the obstacle is connoted

by the word 'sun'. The word sun may connote a hot weather or intense heat. One of the obstacles of being a worker in the plantation is working under the sun. In the plantation, the crops are harvested at noon. Sometimes, the slaves are passed out when harvesting the crops because of the intense heat of the sun and the heavy work they have to do. The line twenty-five implicitly describes the condition of the Negro mother when she works.

In line twenty-six, the word 'work' may imply two meanings; either it refers to the work which the Negro mother does it daily, or it refers to the work to reach her dream and goal. Either way, the line tells that the Negro mother will not stop working and struggling until her work is done. Line twenty-seven is the repetition of the previous line which is used for emphasizing that the Negro mother will keep working, no matter what the obstacles are, until her work is done. From the explanation, it can be concluded that line twenty-five to twenty-seven in the third stanza implicitly describe the will of the Negro mother. She will struggle as hard as she can and she will not stop until she reaches her goals although many obstacles lie ahead.

I was the **seed** of the **coming Free**.  
 I **nourished** the dream that nothing could **smother**  
**Deep** in my breast - the Negro mother. (Stanza 3, line 28-30)

In line twenty-eight, the word 'seed' can be found again. As has been discussed before, the word 'seed' connotatively symbolizes a new life which is soon to be born. Unlike the previous symbol, which refers to the Negro mother's offspring or descendants, the symbol here refers to the Negro mother. It is because

the line says that she was the seed of the coming free. The word 'coming' denotes an arrival in the future. The word 'Free' is capitalized in the first letter because it emphasizes the strong will of the Negro mother's dream, which is to be free. In other words, line twenty-eight means that the Negro cannot get herself a freedom. Thus, the freedom can be reached only through her children. In addition, she is the life which will give a birth of the freedom.

In line twenty-nine, the word 'nourished' means keeping a belief in one's mind denotatively. What is kept in the Negro mother's mind is freedom. The word 'smother' means suffocating someone until dies. Hence, line twenty-nine tells that the Negro mother keeps a strong belief in freedom that no one can ruin that belief. She believes in freedom although she cannot get hers. Thus, she hopes her children can keep the belief and realize it in the future. In addition, line thirty implies that the Negro mother does not tell anyone about her belief in freedom. It can be assumed that if she tells anyone about it, her employer may hear it. As a result, she may undergo life worse than she has lived. Hence, she chooses to remain silent and keeps the belief in herself because she cannot risk her children's freedom.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the Negro mother is tired of being oppressed and worked as a slave. The Negro mother has no one to support her when she is on her lowest point of her life. Yet, the Negro mother still believes in God and keeps struggling in life. It is because she believes in freedom and she does it for the sake of her children and her race.

#### 4.2.3 The Expression of the Negro Mother

I had only hope **then**, but now through **you**,  
**Dark ones** of today, my dreams **must** come true: (Stanza 3, line 31-32).

In line thirty-one, the word ‘then’ denotes the time in the past. It refers to the time when the Negro mother have a terrible life and when she works in the plantation. From the line, it can be concluded that when she works in the plantation, she can only hope that she will be free from slavery. Knowing that she cannot get her freedom, she expects her children to realize her dream as has been stated in the previous line before. The word ‘you’ in line thirty one refers to her children.

In line thirty-two, the phrase ‘dark ones’ implies both denotative and connotative meaning. The word ‘dark’ denotes a person that has a black skin, which refers to the Negro mother’s offspring. In addition, the word ‘dark’ also connotes fear, gloom, and unhappiness as previously has been discussed. It refers to the Negro mother’s life and experience. The phrase implies that the Negro mother wants her children to remember the history of their race. She wants them to remember that black people have been massively exploited and treated badly because of their skin color. In addition, the word ‘must’ depicts strong determination of the Negro mother in realizing her dream through her children. Because she cannot get her freedom, she insists her children to realize the dream for the sake of the Negro mother and their race. From the explanation, it can be concluded that the lines mean the Negro mother wants her children to remember



the history of their race by calling them ‘dark ones’. In addition, she insists her children to realize her dream one way or another.

All you **dark children** in the world out there,  
Remember my **sweat**, my **pain**, my **despair**. (Stanza 3, line 33-34).

In line thirty-three, the word ‘dark’ also refers to both denotative and connotative meaning. The word ‘dark’ shares the same meaning as in the previous line which has been discussed before. Thus, the phrase ‘dark children’ refers to all the next generation of the Negro mother. Not only does the phrase refer to the Negro mother’s offspring, but it also refers to all children which share the same generation as the Negro mother’s children.

In line thirty-four, the word ‘sweat’, ‘pain’, and ‘despair’ refers to the life and the experience of the Negro mother. The word ‘sweat’ refers to when the Negro mother has to work in the plantation to produce the commodity the employer wants. As has been mentioned before, the slaves work at noon under the intense heat of the sun which mean they are sweating. The word ‘pain’ refers to when the Negro mother gets beaten and mistreated. As has been discussed before, she gets beaten treated badly although she produces the commodities which her employer wants. In other words, it is not about work, it is an oppression. The word ‘despair’ refers to the time when the Negro mother is separated from her family. She is separated from both her children and her husband. She feels completely lost and empty. From the explanation, it can be concluded that the Negro mother wants her children to remember her suffering and her sorrow. It is relevant to the previous line. The

history that the Negro mother's children have to remember is the suffering and the painful story of their race.

Remember my **years**, heavy with **sorrow** –  
And make of those **years** a **torch** for **tomorrow**. (Stanza 3, line 35-36)

In line thirty-five, the word 'years' refers to the year that the Negro mother has been left alone. The word 'sorrow' emphasizes the suffering and the loss of the Negro mother. In addition, the use of symbol can be found in line thirty-six. The word 'torch' symbolizes a guidance; a light that can guide out of the darkness. Hence, it can be concluded that the Negro mother wants her children to remember her suffering and her pain and to turn it into a motivation which can lead them out from slavery. She wants them to remember how painful and how sorrowful it is to be a slave, and she wants them to fight for their freedom,

Make of my **pass** a **road** to the **light**  
Out of the **darkness**, the **ignorance**, the **night**. (Stanza 3, line 37-38)

In line thirty-seven, the word 'pass' means die denotatively. The word 'road' denotes a path that leads one place to another. In the poem, the Negro mother starts from a heavy life as a slave and has to walk down the path to reach the freedom. The final destination of the Negro mother is connoted by the word 'light'. The word 'light' is the opposite of the word 'dark' which has been used several times in the previous line of the poem. The word 'light' connotes joy and bright future.

In line-thirty eight, the words ‘darkness’, ‘ignorance’, and ‘night’ connote the same meaning that refers to a painful life of the Negro mother. The words refer to when she is separated from her family and no one respects her, how hard she works in the field, and how painful she is treated by her employers. From the explanation, it can be concluded that the lines mean the Negro mother opens a path for her children and the next generation after hers to reach their freedom. She wants them to make her death worthwhile and by fighting for the freedom. Not only does the children do it for the sake of the Negro mother, but it also for the sake of their race so that the race can keep up living and not extinct under the oppression of the slavery.

Lift high my **banner** out of the **dust**.  
 Stand like free men supporting my **trust**.  
 Believe in the right, let none push you back. (Stanza 3, line 39-41)

In line thirty-nine, the word ‘banner’ denotatively means a piece of cloth with a sign written on it which usually used by people taking part in a march. The word ‘dust’ connotatively means dirty and to be placed on the ground. Thus, the line implies that the Negro mother wants her children to lift up her name which has been stepped under the oppression of the slavery. During her life, she gets oppressed and mistreated many times. In her death, the Negro mother wants to be lifted up even for once.

The word ‘trust’ in line forty refers to the belief which the Negro mother keeps all the time. The line implies a meaning that the Negro mother wants her belief to be supported because she has to live alone and has no one to support her

when she was alive. Because she cannot get what she wants when she was alive, she wants to be supported though she is dead. Thus, the Negro mother also wants her children and the next generation after hers to keep steady and believe the same thing as the Negro mother believe it exists; freedom. Line forty one implies the strong will of the Negro mother to be free by asking her children to keep the belief and to fight for freedom as hard they can so that no one can put their will and their belief down. From the explanation, it can be concluded that the Negro mother passes her belief to her children and the next generation. She wants them to believe what the Negro mother believes; that no one is not worthy to become a slave and that everyone is born to be free.

Remember the **whip** and the slaver's **track**.

Remember how the strong in **struggle** and **strife** (Stanza 3, line 42-43)

In line forty-two, the Negro mother reminds her children again to remember the suffering of being a slave. The word 'whip' connotatively means violence. The word refers to the violence which the slaves get during their life. The word 'track' denotes the same meaning as the word 'road' which has been discussed in the previous line before. The difference is 'road' suggests a wide and large path which leads one place to another. It is also smoother than 'track'. In the other hand, 'track' suggests a rough small path. From the explanation, it can be concluded that the Negro mother reminds her children to remember how tough and rough of living under the oppression of slavery.

In line forty-three, the Negro mother reminds her children about the fight and the struggle of their race in opposing slavery; that many slaves have died because they fight for freedom.

Still **bar** you the way, and **deny** you life –  
But **march** ever forward, breaking down **bars**.  
Look ever upward at the **sun** and the **stars**. (Stanza 3, line 44-46)

In line forty-four and forty-five, the word ‘bar’ denotatively means to prevent something. The word ‘bar’ is still related to line forty-two to forty-three. It refers to the oppression which the slaves get from their employers. The word ‘march’ means a continuous walk. Thus, the line implies that the Negro mother asks her children to fight the refusal which prevents them from getting their freedom. They have to try hard no matter how thick the barrier is. It has to be continuous so that the barrier that blocks them will be broken eventually sooner or later.

In line forty-six, the word ‘sun’ and ‘stars’ denote an object placed in the outer space. Connotatively, the line implies that the Negro mother’s children have to look up and have to value themselves. It is because they have been looked down and have been underestimated all the time. The Negro mother wants her children to prove that they are also human beings that should be treated equally and should not be exploited violently.

Oh, my **dark children**, may my **dreams** and my **prayers**  
**Impel** you forever up the **great stairs** – (Stanza 3, line 47-48)

The phrase 'dark children' refers to the children of the Negro mother, as has been previously discussed. The word 'impel' denotes the urge to do something. The phrase 'great stairs' may connote freedom and equality because as has been discussed before, the slaves, including the Negro mother, have been looked down and have been underestimated for a long time. In other words, they are in the lower position than other human beings. They have to walk up the stairs in order to be free and treated equally as human beings. While walking up the stairs, they also have to break the barrier which prevents them from reaching their destination. It is not an easy thing to do. It can be concluded that the Negro always prays for the freedom of her children and the next generation. She believes that God will grant her prayers and wishes.

For I will be with you till no **white brother**  
Dares **keep down** the children of the Negro Mother. (Stanza 3, line 49-50)

The phrase 'white brother' is firstly used and it is placed in the last lines of the poem. It is because of the Negro mother's fear of reprisal. It can be seen that the word 'brother' is used instead of using the word 'people'. It can be concluded that the line implies that although the black people have been violently treated and oppressed, they still consider the white people as their brother and sister. They may have a grudge toward them, but they do not want to treat them like they have been treated. They just want to be free and treated equally as human beings.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Langston Hughes's "The Negro Mother" is one of the poems which describes the life of black people during slavery era in America. The poem specifically tells about the hope, will, and dream of a black mother who works as a slave. Hughes uses a first person point of view to tell the story.

Hughes's "The Negro Mother" tells the conditions of a black mother who has to work as a slave. She has to undergo a terrible experience in life. She is taken forcefully when she is pregnant and she is forced to work in plantations in the South. Being oppressed by her employers, she manages to develop class consciousness which is needed to rise up against her oppressor. The proof that she manages to develop class consciousness is that the alienation. The first alienation is when she is separated from the fruits of her work. She is forced to produce the commodities her employer wants, yet she still gets badly beaten and violently treated. The second alienation is when she has no time to fulfill her basic needs. All the time she has is used for working; no time for learning how to write and how to read. The last alienation is when she is separated from her family. She has no one to support her when she is on her lowest point of her life. In addition, she also has no respect from other people. She has been looked down because she is a slave.

Knowing that she cannot get her freedom, she writes her hopes, beliefs, and dreams to her children in hopes that they can realize it in the future for the sake of

the Negro mother and their race. The hopes, beliefs, and dreams are hidden through the use of denotation, connotation, and symbol which are used in the poem.

Hughes uses diction, which consists of denotation and connotation, to hide the true meaning of the poem. The meaning is that the Negro mother, which represents the black people, wants to be free from the oppression and exploitation of slavery. The meaning is repeated through the use of different denotation and connotation in the poem. Thus, the repetition is used for emphasizing the will and the dream of the Negro mother. The Negro mother tells the bad condition of being a slave to her children and the next generation after hers in the hope that they will make it as a motivation to get the freedom they have always dreamed for. The Negro mother passes the belief she believes it exist: that everyone is born to be free. In addition, she also reminds her children about how to be tough and to be rough of being a slave. Because she has been looked down in her life as a slave, she asks her children to value themselves and to look up and fight for freedom no matter what the obstacles are.

The poem is an alternative work prepared by Hughes for the black people who cannot buy his other works. "The Negro Mother" is relevant to the will of Langston Hughes in making literary works: that he wants to write literary works which depict the life of the black people. Hughes wants his race to be recognized in American culture. Hughes also wants to deliver a message to the black people that equality is not a dream. In addition, although the black people have been violently treated and oppressed, he wants the black people not to hold a grudge toward the



white people. Hughes reminds them that they just fought for freedom and equality, not fight for revenge. The message is delivered and hidden within the poem.

To conclude, not only does Hughes “The Negro Mother” have its descriptive aspect, a poem that tells the condition of a black mother working as a slave, but it also has its emotional aspect, a poem which arouses the readers feeling of pity towards the oppression and exploitation of the black people. The emotional aspect which shows the miserable life of a slave’s life makes the poem very powerful in its description.

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## APPENDIX

### The Negro Mother

Children, I come back today  
 To tell you a story of the long dark way  
 That I had to climb, that I had to know  
 In order that the race might live and grow.  
 Look at my face - dark as the night –  
 Yet shining like the sun with love's true light.  
 I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea  
 Carrying in my body the seed of the free.  
 I am the woman who worked in the field  
 Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield. 10  
 I am the one who labored as a slave,  
 Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave –  
 Children sold away from me, I'm husband sold, too.  
 No safety, no love, no respect was I due.

Three hundred years in the deepest South:  
 But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.  
 God put a dream like steel in my soul.  
 Now, through my children, I'm reaching the goal.

Now, through my children, young and free,  
 I realized the blessing deed to me. 20  
 I couldn't read then. I couldn't write.  
 I had nothing, back there in the night.  
 Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears,  
 But I kept trudging on through the lonely years.  
 Sometimes, the road was hot with the sun,  
 But I had to keep on till my work was done:  
 I had to keep on! No stopping for me –  
 I was the seed of the coming Free.  
 I nourished the dream that nothing could smother  
 Deep in my breast - the Negro mother. 30  
 I had only hope then, but now through you,  
 Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:  
 All you dark children in the world out there,  
 Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.  
 Remember my years, heavy with sorrow –  
 And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.  
 Make of my pass a road to the light  
 Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night.  
 Lift high my banner out of the dust.  
 Stand like free men supporting my trust. 40

Believe in the right, let none push you back.  
Remember the whip and the slaver's track.  
Remember how the strong in struggle and strife  
Still bar you the way, and deny you life –  
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.  
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.  
Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers  
Impel you forever up the great stairs –  
For I will be with you till no white brother  
Dares keep down the children of the Negro Mother.

50